

Designing Our Future: A Blueprint for Transforming Vermont's Education System

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Preface

This document represents the work of a visioning exercise conducted within the Vermont Agency of Education to begin to imagine the design of a modern education system. The document itself functions like a wiki where additions and changes are developed through a collaborative authoring process. This authoring process is managed by the Agency's administrative team. Because of the iterative nature of the document, it will always be labelled as "DRAFT".

The central premise of this visioning exercise is that Vermont has an overly complex education system, especially when considered with its scale and relatively small number of students. Another assumption is that the chief function of the state in the education system is to ensure quality and equity of opportunity for all of Vermont's students, and that perhaps the complexity of the system itself inhibits the ability to achieve these goals.

Contributors to this document are invited to respond to the prompt, "To what extent would a Greatly Simplified School District (GSSD) model create opportunities for . . ." Vermont parties interested in contributing to this document by submitting a response to this prompt should contact Ted Fisher, the Director of Communications and Legislative Affairs (ted.fisher@vermont.gov).

Notes on Version 2.0

Version 2.0 of this document is expanded to include additional proposals developed within the Agency of Education. The document retains its original introduction and the "single school district" model developed by Secretary Daniel French as an example of the most extreme simplification possible to identify examples on how a simplification of the system could potentially realize new opportunities for students.

Introduction

In 1968, the Vermont State Board of Education published its [Vermont Design for Education](#), a document that described the concept of making the personal learning aspirations of students the focus of the education process. Since that time, many changes have occurred to the Vermont education system that have distracted Vermont from achieving this vision.

One of the most significant changes was Act 60 of 1997, a major revision to Vermont's education funding system because of the Brigham decision. Although the Brigham decision settled the issue that the state, not locals, was ultimately responsible for the education of Vermont's students, the new education funding system designed through Act 60 did not envision changes to the education delivery system itself; it was a patch for the legacy governance structure that was established in the late 1880s.

Education is a process conceived to benefit the learner. Central to any focus is the individual and how his learning process may be maximized. This idea is basic and provides the foundation of all other elements of education.

Vermont Design for Education, 1968

The statewide education funding system created under Act 60 and the successor legislation of Act 68, however, did expose the inefficiencies of the old governance structure. The new funding system caused education spending to increase, as districts with relatively smaller grand lists could increase their spending levels without seeing significant increases to their tax rates. At about the same time, the number of students in Vermont started to decline following a larger demographic trend witnessed throughout northern New England. This combination of increases in education spending coupled with declines in the number of students caused significant pressure on the education funding system since the diffused nature of the Vermont's education governance structure was not able to respond to these challenges in a systematic manner.

During the same period, federal education policy in the form of the No Child Left Behind Act, put new requirements on states to develop school accountability systems. These policies created new challenges for Vermont's education governance structure which in many cases was comprised of school districts too small to yield valid accountability data. The data did identify, however, a persistent equity gap in student achievement between students in poverty and their non-poverty peers.

Faced with challenges in affordability, equity, and accountability, policy makers increasingly began to focus on school district governance reform. Starting with Act 153 of 2010, the General Assembly began to formally explore the incentivization of school district consolidation. Act 153 was largely voluntary, however, resulting in few district mergers. Act 153 did require the centralization of certain school district services at the supervisory union level which forced many school districts to adjust how they provided these services and to seek greater efficiencies by sharing services with neighboring districts. After several statewide conversations about governance reform including the Green Mountain Imperative in 2015 which was co-sponsored

by the Vermont Business Roundtable, the Legislature passed Act 46 in 2015 which called for a less-than-voluntary approach to school district governance reform.

Although the jury is still out on Act 46, one common thread throughout all these policy initiatives is they do not include a central design or focus. From Act 60 to Act 46, the common policy approach has been to tinker with the system and hope for the best. This lack of policy coherence has led to a significant amount of “initiative fatigue” in Vermont’s education system. A similar amount of systems fatigue has been observed in the delivery of related human resource systems such as child services, early learning and care, and mental health. This concern about systems capacity points to a need to rethink education, social, and economic policies to provide a more effective and integrated approach, especially considering Vermont’s current and future demographic challenges.

The Demographic and Efficiency Context

Vermont is facing a very challenging demographic situation. Our K-12 infrastructure was built for more than 100,000 students, but enrollment has declined to 76,000 in the last twenty years – a decline of about 27,000 students. All counties have experienced drastic reductions in traditional K-12 enrollment since 2004. Five counties have experienced K-12 enrollment losses of over 20%, with Essex County having lost over 40% of its K-12 enrollment. Only Franklin County and Lamoille County have lost less than 10% of their K-12 enrollment, and the U.S. Department of Education predicts Vermont student count will drop below 70,000 by 2026.

Unfortunately, Vermont’s education spending has not decreased at the same rate. According to the National Education Association, in the 2015-2016 school year Vermont’s per pupil expenditure was \$23,557, or \$2,000 more per pupil than New York who spent the second most. This compares to a national average of \$11,787 per pupil. This should not be surprising since 80% of school district costs are tied directly to personnel, and Vermont’s school employee staff-to-student ratio has shrunk to 4.25 to 1, the lowest in the nation.

There is no simple policy solution for this complex situation. Ronald Heifetz of Harvard University might describe this context as a series of “adaptive challenges” (Heifetz, 1994). According to Heifetz (1994), adaptive challenges require new solutions, solutions that require a consideration of what must be given up to thrive relative to what cannot be compromised to be successful in the future. Basically, Vermont’s education delivery will need to adapt to the current demographic context to be successful. We will need to redesign our education delivery system, not just make incremental adjustments. This will mean taking a different approach to developing education policy than has been used in the past.

Representative Strategy vs. Design Strategy

Two strategies often used to create policies are representative strategies and design strategies. A representative strategy is often used when a solution to a problem already exists, and when affirmation of stakeholder values or current practices supersedes the need for change. Through a representative strategy, each major stakeholder is invited to participate in creating the new

policy approach to ensure continuity with the past and to ensure stakeholder buy-in during implementation. This has been the typical approach to Vermont education policy development.

A design strategy, on the other hand, is more useful when there is a need to create a new policy solution. With a design strategy, a small design team is assembled with the goal of rapidly creating a viable design prototype. Membership on the design team is not necessarily representative, but rather determined by the ability of the chosen team members to rapidly produce a high-quality prototype, a prototype that can then be shared broadly among various stakeholder groups for feedback and reaction.

To focus stakeholder feedback using a design strategy, essential design elements for the prototype are developed. Stakeholder feedback is measured against these desired design elements as opposed to comparing it to perceptions of the current system since by definition the new system is designed to be different. For example, if an architect was designing a new house for a client, the architect would first seek to determine the client's essential design elements for a new house (e.g. three bathrooms, fieldstone fireplace, etc.) that need to be incorporated into the new design. A consideration of the design elements relative to the client's current house might not be relevant, especially if the design of the current house has been deemed to be inadequate to meet the client's future needs.

A design strategy approach is more applicable to the Vermont context since Vermont will be facing a series of adaptive challenges that will require new solutions. In the case of education policy, a design prototype would be in the form of a blueprint that includes the overarching design elements and a description of the desired end state. From there, a series of "design challenges" would be organized to address specific technical areas and to further refine the model based on focused stakeholder feedback.

Education Policy Design Team

Governor Phil Scott has outlined broad policy goals for Vermont. These goals include making Vermont more affordable, growing the economy, and protecting Vermont's most vulnerable citizens. These broad goals have been further delineated into a statewide strategic plan. Education policy was determined to be an intersecting point among the strategic plan goals since it is central to many other aspects of policy.

In the fall of 2018, an education policy design team was formed to pursue a new and more comprehensive policy approach to education. Members of this team (hereinafter "The Team") included the Secretaries of Commerce and Community Development, Digital Services, Education, Human Services, the Commissioner of Labor, and staff from the Governor's office. The goal of the education policy design team was to produce a "policy blueprint" to guide future policy decisions. This blueprint is broken down into sections including: 1) design elements, 2) education delivery system structure, and 3) future design challenges.

Education Policy Design Elements

The Team reviewed the current structure of Vermont's education policies, social policies, and economic development policies. Additionally, the Team considered the demographic context of the state. Based on this review, the Team determined the future education system should be designed around the following design elements.

| | Commentary |
|--|--|
| The system should be flexible enough to meet the personal learning aspirations of each student. | The current system creates barriers for access to high quality learning opportunities for all students. |
| The system should be better integrated with the social service delivery system. | Social services are not well integrated with education systems in all regions of the state. The system is highly dependent on quasi-formal collaboration among agencies. |
| The system should put an increased focus on early learning and care. | Investments in early learning and care need to be better integrated between health and education systems. |
| The system should put a focus on teacher quality. | Teacher quality systems are too complex and rely on legacy systems such as local standards boards and cumbersome portfolio processes. There needs to be a better connection between pre-service licensing and in-service development. |
| The system should support the use of quality data. | The complexity and scale of the current system inhibits the efficient collection, arrangement, and visualization of data to guide decision making. |
| The system should support a more efficient and responsive approach to curriculum and professional development. | Many districts and schools work in relative isolation in terms of curriculum and professional development causing quality and equity gaps. The constant "reinventing of the wheel" is a drain on the capacity of teachers and systems. |
| The system should support the broader social and economic development of our state. | Currently, the investment in education is not seen as part of a broader investment in the future vitality of the state. Regional economic planning is not necessarily related to education planning. |
| The system should be more nimble, efficient and effective. | The current system is too complex, too expensive and too difficult to manage. Effectiveness and equity indicators could be better utilized if the system were simplified. |

Prototype for A New Education Delivery System Structure

The Team considered the above design elements when contemplating a new design for the education delivery system. The Team also reviewed the structure of other education delivery systems including the State of Hawaii (the simplest model - Hawaii has a single school district with more than twice as many students as Vermont) and the Province of New Brunswick (a system in the region that went through a major redesign in 2000). The goal was to articulate a system structure "end state" that would be both more nimble and responsive while at the same time ensuring local community participation. What follows is a brief description of how this new design would work around specific areas.

Roles and Responsibilities

The system would consist of a single statewide school district. Students would have statewide school choice among all the public schools, technical centers, and non-sectarian independent schools approved by the Agency.

The system would be directed by the Secretary of Education and administered by the Agency of Education. The current State Board of Education would be abolished in favor of having the General Assembly and Governor being the primary entities responsible for education policy like other policy areas within the state.

The system would be administered by a series of four Regional School Boards (Northern Region, Chittenden Region, Central Region, and Southern Region) which would be comprised of locally-elected representatives and led by a regional Superintendent. The regional entities would be administrative entities, not school districts. The regional school board would hire its superintendent, have policy authority, and be responsible for monitoring student outcomes relative to the goals of its regional continuous improvement plan.

The regional superintendent would supervise the operations of all the schools in the region. The superintendent would have the authority to hire and dismiss all regional staff and would be responsible for developing the regional expenditure budget and the regional continuous improvement plan.

Each school would be required to have a Parent School Committee. These committees would advise school principals on various aspects relative to operating a school, but the principal would have final authority and responsibility for school decisions.

The principal's major function would be to operate a school and to develop a school improvement plan. Principals would report directly to the regional superintendent in the performance of their duties.

Teachers would become state employees of the single statewide school district. There would be one teacher contract.

Schools

Current school property would be transferred to the state for operation by the statewide school district. If the state determines to not operate a school at a future date, the original municipal owner of the school would have the right of first refusal to purchase the school under the same terms as those used when ownership was transferred to the state.

Subject to the approval of the Secretary, a regional school board would have authority to close schools consistent with the following parameters: 1) ensure an "educational home" for early learning in literacy through grade 4 in each community as practicable, 2) diverse and expansive learning opportunities on a regional basis for all students in grades 5-8, and 3) flexible academic and applied learning pathways for all students in grades 9-12.

Student Learning

The scope of authority over compulsory education would begin at age 5 and end at age 18. Each student would have a personal learning plan starting in Kindergarten. Early learning and care will be coordinated on a regional basis and supervised by the regional superintendent using a mix of public and private providers. Early learning and care would be targeted to ensure all students begin Kindergarten ready to learn. Primary grades instructional systems will be focused on ensuring each student is reading on grade level by the end of grade 4 as measured by a state-established benchmarking assessment.

Curriculum and Professional Development

The Agency would be required to establish standards for educational curricula. Specific state curriculum would be developed by state-level, teacher-led Curriculum Design Councils and then implemented in each school. The Agency would supervise and coordinate statewide professional development to support the development of teacher quality, and to ensure the equitable dissemination of high quality instructional materials and expertise.

Data Systems

School-related data systems would be centralized at the state level. Since all school employees would be state employees, HR and accounting functions would be centralized at the state level as well.

Educator Licensure

Teachers and administrators graduating from an approved Vermont higher education program would be granted an initial provisional license. The assignment of a regular license would be made after the satisfactory completion of three years of successful teaching/administrative experience and upon the recommendation of a regional superintendent. True reciprocity with other states would be established for educators completing an approved licensure program in another state. Initial licensure through reciprocity would be for a provisional license only. Re-licensure based on the accumulation of a certain number of professional development hours consistent with the educator's plan for professional development would be granted upon the recommendation of a regional superintendent.

Access to Post-Secondary Learning

Needs-based scholarships would be provided to support student access to post-secondary and higher education learning opportunities at state institutions in exchange for a commitment on the part of the student to live and work in the state for a certain number of years.

Budgeting

Each regional superintendent would prepare an expenditure budget for his or her region and submit the budget to the Secretary for approval. The Secretary would be responsible for

creating an overall education budget which would be submitted to the General Assembly for approval as part of the regular state budgeting process.

Regional Social Services

Social service regions will be redrawn to be consistent with each educational region and integrated to the greatest extent possible.

Regional Economic Development Planning

Economic development regions will be redrawn to be consistent with each educational region. Each regional superintendent shall work closely with economic planning officials to ensure educational assets are deployed in a manner consistent with the region's economic development goals and the state's strategic plan.

Future Design Challenges

Redesigning the structure of Vermont's education delivery system will be complex work, but once a desired "end state" is articulated, specific areas of future design work can be identified. In support of this future work, the Team has identified a few areas for focused study.

Education Finance System

The current education finance system will need to be restructured around the assumption of a single school district with a single tax rate. This would be an opportunity to also consider redesigning the Common Level of Appraisal (CLA) system. The revenue mix for education funding should also be evaluated.

Regional Infrastructure

This blueprint anticipates the creation of larger regional administrative entities to replace the current supervisory union and supervisory district central office functions. Since HR and other back office functions would be centralized at the state level, a new staffing pattern for these entities would have to be established. These central offices should be located coincidentally with economic and social service centers and should consider the efficient use of state offices and IT infrastructure.

Revisions to Title 16 and Education Regulations

Implementing this plan would require major revisions to Title 16 and State Board of Education regulations.

Student Transportation

Currently, school boards have the option to provide student transportation. The creation of a single statewide school district will open the student transportation conversation up to a broader discussion largely focused on equitable access to learning opportunities.

Moving to a single school district model for Vermont is a provocative idea, and politically a very challenging concept considering our tradition of local control. The idea of a simplification of the system still has some merit, however. The question would be whether such a simplification is best achieved through an incremental improvement of the current structure, or a design evolution of the system.

To support the design approach, Secretary French developed a design question, "To what extent would a Greatly Simplified School District (GSSD) create opportunities . . ." Members of the Agency administrative team were then asked to respond to this question from the perspective of their role within the Agency.

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Additional Proposals in Version 2

A Regional Approach to Education and Economic Development

Currently, Vermont faces a near-crisis in terms of its declining youth population and numerous barriers to boosting the state's economic development and vitality. In many ways, our problems are the same as those in other rural states throughout the nation. However, what is now clear is that if we do not work together to attract more young families and thriving businesses to come to Vermont, our quality of life is unlikely to improve and will likely plummet in the next decade.

One potential solution to this challenge is to re-distribute state structural systems and funding allocations to both simplify and better monitor success in our education and workforce development systems, as well as foster intentional links between education and both regional and statewide economic development efforts.

For instance, the Agency of Education's recent proposal suggests that moving to a unified statewide school district, with four different regions that manage local systems, funding, and practice, might be beneficial. (Note: For economic development purposes, given what is already happening in places like Brattleboro, it might be more advantageous to envision four "quadrant" regions rather than 3-4 lateral zones within the state.) If we moved to a greatly simplified school district, to what extent would this create opportunities for workforce development and economic growth?

First, a simplified education system would mean easier streamlining of curriculum and facilitated sharing of innovative practice. Staff at the Agency of Education are currently working with Career Technical Education (CTE) directors to develop statewide career pathways in Advanced Manufacturing, Cybersecurity, and Health Sciences. These sectors all promise high-pay and high-demand career opportunities for Vermont's students in the coming years.

Curricular components of the career pathways are co-developed and agreed upon by all directors and ensure that students who complete them learn the same material, sit for the same industry-recognized credential assessments, and are comparably prepared across the state.

Accordingly, employers can be sure of a reliable, consistent stream of employees, from those ready to work directly out of high school in skilled professions to those who complete graduate degrees in Vermont postsecondary institutions. A more unified education system would allow us to work together to develop a shared set of curricula and practices for all students, not solely those in CTE.

Additional "wins" in this area could include:

- Enhanced inclusion and integration of teacher professional development and curriculum coordination, without necessarily having schools and CTEs relinquish what they uniquely have to offer
- Better assurance that, as a state, we are offering the necessary number and types of CTE programs. For instance, are we currently offering too many programs in cosmetology

because nearly every regional CTE center (there are 17) feels compelled to offer it? How many students trained in cosmetology does our state realistically need? By scaling up programs through a regional approach, we can potentially right-size statewide offerings.

Second, a regional approach would allow for more cross-pollination of local economic development and education leadership. Whereas it is now somewhat rare for local school boards to engage intentionally with city councils, economic development boards, regional labor offices, or town select boards in terms of policy development, budget decisions, and short- or long-term planning, such practice could become the norm under a new system. Such collaborative enterprise and engagement would better ensure that all education-focused decisions (not just those that affect CTE) were made in the context of regional economic and workforce development needs. This would also open up opportunities for enhancing a statewide system of career advising and mentoring, a set of experiences that is sorely lacking for most students given current demands on school counselors. Finally, this approach could foster consideration of existing educator contract terms, moving toward a more holistic, shared approach that appreciates the relevant skills CTE teachers may bring to the table. This could also enhance recruitment of CTE teachers which is currently very difficult in some areas.

Third, a vastly simplified education system would improve equity in student access to opportunities throughout the state. It would allow the state to move away from a “Chittenden County” versus “the rest of Vermont” mentality. Implementation of personalized education practice would be monitored at a statewide level, not in the patchwork manner in which it is currently conducted. Greater transparency in instructional practice, scaling digital and broadband access at the regional (as opposed to local) level, and sharing innovations at a statewide level would help the state target resources to those areas that are in greater need. This would better ensure that all students’ needs were met effectively, including enhanced knowledge of opportunities for work-based learning across the state, possible career trajectories, and specific state-level career prospects.

Finally, each of the advances under the new system noted above could help sell the state as an “education destination,” focused on rigorous personalized education, equity in opportunity for all students, and strong ties between both academics and career readiness starting in the elementary grades. A marketing campaign designed to draw in more young families and keep graduating college students within the state could be relatively simple to develop based on these novel features.

In addition to these issues, several specific elements of the current education system would likely require transformation, or even eradication, to realize fully the promise of the simplified system. Below, I list a few of these current local policies and practices, including what is gained by eliminating them.

| What Must Be Given Up “In Order to Thrive” | What Is Gained |
|---|---|
| A. Unique graduation requirements set at individual high school level | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Consistent practice and transparency in what CTE “counts for” re high school graduation requirements 2. Less confusion for students 3. Increased equity in student experiences and outcomes, statewide 4. Allows CTE instructors and administrators to focus on core instruction, not matching across diverse requirements |
| B. Siloed curricular development and scheduling approach between general education and CTE, as well as relative over-emphasis in general education on academic preparation, at expense of career readiness and life navigation skills | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Regional discussion of what employers need, what jobs are on the horizon, specific postsecondary education and/or training required for each. 2. Broader conversations for all students (not just CTE concentrators) about career interest and readiness, workplace skills and readiness (at all levels, not just immediate entry) |
| C. Insular decision-making | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Come together as regions, and ultimately as a state, to save the state; increase affordability, resources for vulnerable populations, and economic growth. |
| D. Barriers regarding inter-high school transcript transfer | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Seamless experiences for students who, often through no choice of their own (e.g., family moved), must attend another high school 2. Increased equity for required time to graduate and educational experiences (i.e., often it is our low-income students who must move and transfer) 3. Consistent practice and transparency in what “counts for” high school credit and graduation requirements 4. Help the student, not hinder their progress (while simultaneously holding quality/rigor constant) |
| E. Potentially duplicative approaches offering middle and high school students learning experiences that are not aligned with what is already available in the regional CTE center | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Save \$ and improve efficiency 2. Better align secondary school educational resources (including funding) with economic need and innovation efforts in the region 3. Ensure consistent outcomes for students (e.g., same IRCS) 4. Ensure equity in access to these |

| What Must Be Given Up “In Order to Thrive” | What Is Gained |
|---|--|
| | <p>opportunities for all students, not just those who are at schools who can afford this type of middle/high school enrichment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 5. Foster a regional sense of “we-ness” in terms of educating our youth and investing resources together 6. Intentional alignment between middle school curriculum and both high school/postsecondary curriculum (good for all students) |
| F. (Un)intentional bottlenecks in middle and high school re who gets information about and access to both CTE and WBL | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Better align secondary school education resources with economic need and innovation efforts in the region 2. Ensure equity in access to these opportunities for all students, not just those who happen to be exposed to their existence 3. Reduce the negative stigma of CTE |

Administration and Funding Opportunities

Simplify the Education Funding Formula

The current system is one of the most, if not the most, progressive systems in the nation and provides a mechanism to redistribute resources in a way that ensures that the ability of a local community to raise revenue does not drive the education that they are able and willing to deliver to students. However, the tradeoff to accomplish this progressivity has been transparency and complexity.

A shift to the single or regional school districts will provide an opportunity to simplify the education funding formula. The current method for funding general education is driven primarily by the total needs of the education fund, the ability of each town to raise funds (net other revenue to the state), and the relative needs of each town as compared to each other (spending per pupil as compared to the statewide yield). The current method for funding public education in Vermont has been in place for approximately two decades and has been subject to legislative manipulations for specific purposes, resulting in an overcomplicated and distorted method for allocating resources. A simplified formula, based on a simplified administration of public education, would be more transparent and predictable to Vermonters.

More Predictable

Property tax bills

In the current structure, local voters do not know what their property tax bill will be until the entire state votes on spending and the legislature finalize the sources and uses of the Education Fund. With a simplified statewide public education system, much of the uncertainty around

spending in the rest of the system would be eliminated. If the AOE proposes a statewide education budget in January, along with the proposed revenue to fund the statewide system, local voters would now have a better sense of their personal tax sooner. This would provide more opportunity for a voter to lobby the legislature to influence the statewide spending on education. With a statewide system, Vermonters would understand the projected spending on the statewide system at a global level and sooner, while providing insight into local tax rates and revenue changes earlier in the process.

More Transparent

The current mechanism for raising funds from property taxes is through the yield. The yield provides the relative benchmark needed to compare per-pupil spending between districts, effectively this allows for local districts to compare spending to their peers. However, the calculation of the yield is complicated and iterative. Because the yield calculation is iterative by nature, local communities do not know actual local tax rates after they have adopted a budget.

The current funding system includes varying degrees of distortions and exceptions that complicate the administration and allocation of the Education Fund. A statewide system would eliminate the need for the excess spending calculation and the additional work associated with modified unions and towns belonging to multiple school districts. These calculations result in additional administrative work and tracking, this system also allows the legislature to add changes to the formula to benefit specific towns and constituencies. Similarly, earmarks such as the small school's grants that redistribution resources subsidize certain entities would be eliminated.

Administration of the Education System

A statewide system would require a complete redesign of the administration of education. Including what entities are necessary, who does what (regional offices vs. the state), as well as building a system that keeps the state in compliance with federal laws and regulations for the administration and oversight of funds. While complicated, this redesign would provide an opportunity to address some of the administrative challenges in the current system and provide a more robust and sustainable administration. There are currently over 50 separate administrative units that oversee Vermont's supervisory unions. Each of these offices is responsible for the same set of administrative work, including financial services, human resources, purchasing, and grants management (to name a few). The administrative functions of schools are repeated across the state, spreading human capital thin. Shifting to a regional model would mean that regional entities would be responsible for the administrative work. The district governing bodies would have the capacity to staff in a way that achieves efficiencies and economies of scale to allow the human capital to specialize in specific areas (budgeting, accounting, contracting, etc.) rather than have administrative offices where the staff must wear many hats.

Centralized Systems

Systems and processes are different at each supervisory union and are affected by the appetite of the local boards to raise funds for updated systems and human capital. As a result, the capacity to do work and the utilization of technology varies significantly across SUs.

A statewide system could leverage the capacity of the state as a contractor, for the procurement of centralized services. Student data systems, special education systems, financial systems, to name a few, could be centralized at the state level and eliminate variation across entities.

Statewide system procurement would leverage competitive pricing do the market share held by the state as compared to individual SUs. Additionally, the procurement of supplies and equipment could leverage state contracts, and the ability of the state to negotiate more competitive prices, saving the state dollars funds.

An example of this phenomenon is the variety and the use of financial systems. In 2018 the Legislature mandated that all school districts adopt a single financial system, procured by the state, to:

1. simplify reporting,
2. ensure the implementation of a uniform chart of account across all SUs,
3. change the learning curve for school business office staff as they move across entities (a new job does not require a business manager to learn a new system),
4. simplify school mergers,
5. create statewide processes and procedures,
6. achieve competitive pricing for a system by leveraging the size and capacity of the state in the financial system market to save the system money.

The efficiencies generated by one entity participating in this process instead of over 50 will generate both competitive prices as well as improve the use of human capital in administrative processes.

Redundant Accounting

The current system, which involves a myriad of governance structures, and tuitioning across both the public and private education sectors requires an SU to account for students and dollars between entities. The transactions to calculate allowable general education tuition, charging the tuition, and accounting for revenue across supervisory unions, takes time at both the AOE and SUs. If a statewide model was implemented, some of the accounting and tracking necessary to track dollars and students accordingly could be eliminated.

Infrastructure

During the 2008 economic downturn, a changing financial landscape resulted in the elimination of the aid for school construction from the state. Local districts, their capacity to borrow, and the willingness of voter to incur the costs of infrastructure improvements rest at the local level. This may result in significant variation in infrastructure upkeep and improvement across the state. If Vermont implements a statewide or regional approach to public education, the state will look at

infrastructure assets holistically and will have the flexibility to target infrastructure improvements where the needs are greatest versus based on ability and willingness to pay.

Infrastructure is currently evaluated in a vacuum without conversations with neighboring SU. The lack of funding for the state coupled with excess infrastructure has impacted local communities abilities to build state of the art facilities, the education that is delivered as well as a direct impact on local tax rates. If there is a statewide system, the state would be responsible for all buildings, and the state's ability to review all infrastructure as a whole will eliminate siloed decision making about patching building vs building state of the art and centrally located facilities.

Local Cost Shocks

The current Supervisory Union model isolates unanticipated cost shocks to local school districts. If a student moves into a district who has significant needs, and costs, or if a roof on a school fails, the local school district is responsible to pay the bill. The ability of local schools to fund these programs is dictated by the local voter's willingness to budget for unanticipated costs, and the ability to carry forward unspent balances.

The impact of these costs on local schools can be significant in any one year, depending on the relative size of the change. The impact can be so significant that the legislature has created special programs to help districts in the event they have a local cost shock that cannot be managed within the resources allocated by local voters. These small programs require the AOE to establish rules and procedures that outline when and how schools can access these funds, creating additional administrative work at the Agency and locally. If the school districts were larger entities with a bigger resource pool, the impact of small changes that have proportionately high impacts on small district budgets could be more easily absorbed in the system. A large system will have more capacity to manage how resources are deployed and utilized. The need for resources to manage cost shocks will not be born solely by local taxpayers but will be more broadly shared across a larger base of taxpayers.

The adoption of a census-based funding formula for special education in 2018 is an example of school districts craving the desire for flexibility to use funds. However, the tradeoff of a reimbursement system is that any unanticipated costs or shocks will have to be born locally, SUs will no longer be able to request assistance from the state special education appropriation to receive a portion of an unanticipated cost. While the impacts of the new funding system will not be born for another few years, a predictable outcome is that larger districts will not feel the impact of costs shocks locally because of their ability to redistribute resources. Whereas small districts, with minimal flexibility to redistribute a small pool of funds, may see a larger local impact of unanticipated special education costs.

Transportation Costs

Transportation is currently not a required service by public school districts. The state currently subsidizes 50% of prior year spending on transportation in order to incentivize school to

maintain public school transportation services. The current system encourages schools to maintain current services, but it forces them to front the costs of any new transportation services for two years. This puts the burden on any changes to the school transportation system in local school districts. If an SU isn't willing to front the costs of transportation they will not be able to add or change how they deliver transportation to students.

There are both labor force and environmental impacts associated with the current delivery of transportation. The current system can result in more driving by parents and the associated environmental impacts. Regarding the labor force, an unanticipated social impact of Vermont's current transportation structure is the career choices of parents. If a local school does not provide transportation, parents have to make career choices to ensure that they have the flexibility to take kids to and from school, impacting an individual's ability to fully participate in the labor market.

With a statewide school system, the state would determine what level of transportation was necessary for the system. This would provide for a more equitable provision of services, rather than leaving the decision to provide transportation as an option for local schools.

Education Labor Market

While the funding formula has improved the ability of school districts to access funding through the statewide education funding formula, there is still significant variation in the willingness of towns to set spending per pupil. This causes individuals who have the means to sort into certain towns who have a certain willingness and ability to change per pupil spending. This drives not only the education that is delivered in each town – act 60 only impacted the access to funds, not necessarily the willingness and ability to raise funds – but the level of compensation provided to teachers and administrators. In so far as certain areas are willing to stomach higher per-pupil spending, so they can provide different services, including benefits and salaries for teachers. This drives the education labor force to certain areas of the state and away from others, due to better compensation packages. With a statewide system, with a statewide teacher's contract, there would be a level the playing field for teacher compensation across the state. Additionally, it would provide the state the flexibility to target the labor force where it is needed to provide education rather than allowing the variation in each school districts compensation to drive where teachers are employed.

Federal Grants Management

Federal allocations are currently done on a per SU and a per school basis depending on the rules of each grant program. The administration of grants under one school district would change and simplify current grants management practices. The administration of grants would be streamlined by reducing the number of grants that need to be administered by the state as well as the need for local knowledge of grants management and uniform guidance.

State Impacts

The state is currently responsible for creating funding opportunities, reviewing applications, awarding funds, reimbursing subgrantees, and monitoring. Fewer entities will simplify the allocation of these dollars and save administrative time. Currently, every Supervisory union is entitled to an allocation from all of the major federal grant programs. If there were fewer entities to allocate dollars to the AOE could save time at the beginning of the grant process by reducing the volume of risk assessments and allocations needed to award grants. The applications may be more complicated or longer with fewer subgrantees, but the AOE will be better positioned to provide more targeted and in-depth assistance to few as opposed to a high level and little assistance to many.

Currently, SUs provide reimbursement requests to the AOE when they want to draw down funds for their federal grants. The amount of processing the time it takes to review these requests is driven by the number of schools in the state. The number of grant awards times the number of sub-recipients times the number of times reimbursement is requested drives the volume of work that needs to be done in the AOE business office. If the number of subgrantees dropped the amount of work to processes these payments could be reduced significantly and resources redeployed to help school spend money well.

Bulletin 5 and Federal uniform guidance requires that States monitor each grant that a state agency allocates. Monitoring is used to ensure that grant funds are spent on the right kids for the right services at the right time. Monitoring provides both the assurance that schools are spending money correctly as well as gives the state a window into the health of a school districts administration. Currently, the frequency of monitoring visits to any one entity is driven by the number of subgrantees in the state coupled with the amount of staff at the agency.

Under the current model, it is possible that a school district may not be monitored by the state for several years. With one school district, or with fewer regional districts, the State would have the ability to visit all entities more frequently to ensure dollars were being spent correctly and that best practices were being implemented.

Local Level

The current SU model requires that every district as to be versed in the best practices of grants management. Every SU needs to know and implement policies and procedures in alignment with uniform guidance, as well as understand the specifics of each particular funding stream. This results in small staff knowing a little about a lot of things because SUs do not have the staff to allow specialization. With fewer school districts, the state can increase the capacity to understand the particulars of grants and could have the staff capacity to specialize in the complexities of each funding stream.

Access to An Equitable Education

Under longstanding Vermont Supreme Court caselaw, the duty to ensure Vermont schoolchildren can access an equitable education belongs to the State. Brigham v. State, 166 Vt.

246, 268 (1997). Although the State currently fulfills that duty through delegation to the school districts, it could instead do so through more centralized administration.

A greatly simplified school district (GSSD) would fulfill the state's obligation to ensure substantial equality of educational opportunity throughout Vermont. With specific regard to the per pupil funding of education, it would likely ensure a greater degree of equity than the status quo. A GSSD would also be positioned to remedy a longstanding flaw in providing students with the same access to opportunity regardless of where they live.

Under the current governance and funding framework, equitable spending could fairly be characterized as a local option, but not a local requirement. For FY19, the highest spending district on a per pupil basis is Winhall, at \$21,018. The lowest spending district on a per pupil basis is Stannard at \$10,268. The majority of district spending per pupil falls between \$17,000 and \$14,000. These disparities are strong evidence that the current education funding and delivery system merely enables equitable funding and does not guarantee it will be delivered. Additionally, it is an open question whether even these stark differences in spending are violative of constitutional requirements. The Brigham court was clear that Vermont's constitution does not require exact equality in spending:

"... absolute equality of funding is neither a necessary nor a practical requirement to satisfy the constitutional command of equal educational opportunity . . . differences among school districts in terms of size, special educational needs, transportation costs, and other factors will invariably create unavoidable differences in per-pupil expenditures. Equal opportunity does not necessarily require precisely equal per-capita expenditures, nor does it necessarily prohibit cities and towns from spending more on education if they choose, but it does not allow a system in which educational opportunity is necessarily a function of district wealth." Brigham v. State, 166 Vt. 246, 268, 692 (1997).

Although the Brigham court clearly decided that any district may provide more educational spending to its students if it chooses, such choices do impact efforts to achieve statewide equity. To the extent that local wealth, perceived or actual, translates into greater willingness to spend educational dollars, the state will see at least some inequality in spending as long as it relies on locally-approved budgeting. If the state's policy priority is to deliver substantial equity, beyond what may be strictly required by the Education Clause, then a shift in governance and funding could be necessary.

Formation of a greatly simplified school district would remove the connection between a given community's economic circumstances and the education resources allocated to that community's pupils. Although the greatly simplified school district may have needs to spend differently among different schools, the responsibility for equal treatment would rest only with the GSSD. To again quote Brigham, "[m]oney is clearly not the only variable affecting educational opportunity, but it is one that government can effectively equalize."

A single GSSD would also remove current disparities between students who, because of their district of residence, can exercise a choice about which school to attend, and those students who have only one school in which they can enroll free of charge. The current governance framework is arguably inequitable in this respect, but because local districts have the sole legal

authority to either pay tuition or to operate, it is a difficult problem to remedy. By moving to a GSSD, all students would have the same educational choices available to them.

Community Engagement in a GSSD Governance Model

Purpose

Designing Our Future: A Blueprint for Transforming Vermont's Education System proposes a model where education services in Vermont are greatly simplified into one or more districts and coordinated with the delivery of other social and government services on a regional basis. This proposal outlines how community engagement around education issues might be affected by such a policy shift and proposes several mechanisms to guide thoughtful, iterative, and community-informed improvements to education.

Benefits of a GSSD

The benefits (or goals) of a GSSD in terms of community engagement as outlined in this proposal are the following:

- Increase student and parent engagement to involve those with the greatest stake in changes to education policy and curriculum in the process. (**student voice/public engagement**)
- Refocus local conversations around quality and equity and the role schools play as economic drivers, as social and cultural centers, and part of thriving communities. (**public engagement**)
- Firmly reframe the politics of education (particularly around education finance, structure and governance) as statewide conversations. (**public engagement**)
- Create a unified system where all Vermonters are invested in the success of their local schools AND students all over the state. (**public engagement**)
- Give students and teachers a mechanism for experimentation and scaling excellence across regions and the state as a whole. (**open education**)
- Improve communication and relationships with the public at large, local stakeholders and parents through more robust communications structures.

This proposal supports (and balances the tension between) the following three assertions:

- Student voice is central to community engagement in the school context. The three groups most invested in what happens in our schools are students, parents and educators.
- The dual imperatives of Quality and Equity should be of paramount concern in all decisions about education. Student-centered learning has been a core tenet of #vted since the [Vermont Design for Education \(1968\)](#) and before, and is central to building a world class education system.

- Schools play a role in the wider community at large as centers of excellence, of lifelong learning, and as community centers. Communities should feel invested in the success of all their local schools and all their students.

Background

It is clear from the recent public record that Vermonters care deeply about public education. Much ink has been spilled about whether education is rightly a task for localities or the state to take point on. While *Brigham v. State* (1997) and recent lawmaking has pushed Vermont toward more collective responsibility for education, the current situation of both local and state decision-making is still a source of confusion and a perceived lack of transparency.

Additionally, while community engagement around certain issues has been strong and heartfelt, the focus has not always been on what is best for students, their scholastic success and the health of Vermont's future workforce. The engagement has also not been uniform – while there has been a strong community response to issues such as Act 46 (due no doubt, in part to the threat of district governance mergers), other equally critical education policy shifts (such as Act 173) have received little attention.

Currently political and legal responsibility for education is split. The Vermont Constitution (as interpreted by Brigham) makes clear the responsibility for education rests with the Vermont General Assembly. Yet, Acts 60, 68, 130, 46 etc. notwithstanding, the legislature has historically delegated broad powers to local districts while retaining finance and spending control at the state level. If we are to move forward to a statewide system focused strongly on quality and equity for all Vermont learners, this dual structure (and its attendant confusion) must end.

Designing our Future addresses this issue by centralizing education and other government services in one or several school districts. Responsibility for local education services would be vested in four regional school districts, responsible for oversight, policy governance and public engagement. Vermont's current system of local school boards will be disbanded with the dissolution of their local districts. Their political and legal powers should be returned to the citizens of Vermont through their elected representatives.

The [Vermont Design for Education \(1968\)](#) has two passages that are especially significant with regard to community engagement:

“an educational philosophy should center around and focus upon the individual, his learning process, and his relationship and interaction with the teacher.” (Page 1)

“A student’s school should be HIS school, one to be proud of. He should be actively involved in its direction, its maintenance, and its care. The attitude of belonging and being an important contributor can do much toward establishing a spirit of cooperation and respect....” (page 5)

In reading these passages together, one can conclude two things: 1) that Vermont has valued student-centered learning for a very long time, and 2) that we can do a much better job including current and recent students in the policy governance and curriculum development processes. What was self-evident to Vermonters fifty years ago is something that, with digital

technology facilitating decentralized, democratic, and open-source collaboration at hitherto unimaginable granularity, we cannot afford to not do.

Meeting Unmet Needs

Encouraging Student Voice

There is a growing trend around the country to increase student participation and leadership in educational decision-making. This often manifests in the appointment of student members at both the school board and the state board of education level. While this inclusion is laudable, it is by no means the only avenue to increasing student participation, leadership and ownership of the practice of education. An oft cited criticism is that student members often do not have a vote or are outnumbered by their adult board colleagues (and outgunned, the argument goes, to a greater or lesser extent by their youth and lack of experience).

A systematic approach to community engagement under a GSSD model will provide multiple avenues for student engagement and voice at all levels, from leadership within their local school to the SEA level. In a system where we ask students to take an unprecedented level of ownership over their own learning through flexible pathways and PLPs, it is unreasonable and problematic to not ask for their help in shaping improvements to the system as a whole. Finally, as the quotes from the Vermont Design for Education, above, indicate, a role for students in shaping their education and the system that produces it is consistent with the educational values Vermonters share.

Increasing Public Engagement in Student Outcomes

Currently most public conversations around education center around cost of delivery and outcomes. The former is a statewide conversation that plays out slightly differently as local districts set budgets (and is sometimes erroneously understood to be solely a local conversation). The latter tends to be a hyperlocal concern, where parents and community members ask the question: "how are MY schools doing?" "My," in this case, means the school's local town district, union high school district and occasionally, the supervisory union.

With the understanding that the question of who pays and how will be rightly a statewide conversation in the purview of the legislature, with all the opportunities for local engagement in that process that the legislative process affords, there exists both a need and an opportunity to increase public engagement and participation. Additionally, the focus can be scaled up so that "my schools" becomes a statement that applies on a regional basis, with the goals that communities take ownership of increasing student outcomes and supporting continuous improvement processes.

This need is of particular concern when we consider Vermont's demographic and workforce challenges. Increasing public ownership and interest in the success of schools across an entire region is consistent with Vermont's need to market itself both internally (to its next generation of workers) and to external publics. Increased community pride in schools and understanding of just how excellent schools are across Vermont will improve the ability of individual

Vermonters and our community as whole to attract perspective residents. Communicating our world class education system is an important part of the package of lifestyle factors that will draw young parents to Vermont.

Supporting Open Education and Open Curriculum Processes

Secretary French has clearly outlined in several venues the need for #vted to scale “pockets of excellence” across Vermont as a whole. This would give individual regions, schools and even teams of educators the tools to innovate and design new and promising curriculums and practices, test them and share them out for others to mash up, iterate, and improve. The model is based on / integrated with the Open Education Resources (OER) system and grounded in technology.

While the structure and logistics of this process is outside the scope of this proposal, community engagement is an important factor in this model, both as a way for students, parents and community members to give feedback on curriculum approaches and also as a way for community members to understand, support and own this process of dynamic grassroots innovation. In the GSSD model, the community engagement processes could be supported by public and community education councils at all levels.

Giving Schools More Resources for Communications and Outreach

In the current education world, the communications and outreach needs are both constantly shifting and growing in scope. Needs range from crisis communications to engaging in long-term, complex community conversations around student outcomes, school construction, etc. With increasing use of digital tools and a changing news media landscape, school districts around the country are beginning hire full time communications professionals and staff up increasingly complex communications operations. Across the U.S. and Canada, district level Public Relations professionals have proliferated. While conditions in Vermont (namely our size and a different school choice environment) have in some cases slowed this development, many districts are now hiring a separate position or at least formally defining a role.

The benefits of employing a full-time communications professional (versus double hatting or delegating various aspects communications to educators or other staff members) are numerous. Properly qualified PR and communications professionals possess distinct skill sets and are governed by their own best practices and code of ethics. Furthermore, the devotion of a single individual solely to communications has benefits in terms ensuring message coordination, continuity and proper allocation of resources. That said, the decision to hire a full-time school communicator versus a math teacher or special educator is not a particularly difficult one to make. That has implications for equity, with larger or wealthier districts able to devote more resources to community engagement and outreach.

The advantages of a GSSD here are straightforward – fewer, larger districts make it easier and more cost effective to hire quality communications professionals and establish workable outreach structures. Additionally, a small number of regional administrations (or a similarly

small number of regional districts) would allow for intra-region coordination and take advantage of “back end” resources centralized at the SEA level.

Recommendations

The recommendations below address the goals, assertions and needs outlined above. Each point covers one or more wholly or in part:

- Decommission the term “board” when referring to local education oversight entities.
- Use “council” instead to emphasize shifted role.
- Emphasize student voice by encouraging significant (20-30%) student participation on governance councils at all levels.
- Increase parent engagement by requiring significant proportion of members of governance councils to be current or recent parents.
- Reimagine the state board of education as a 20-30 member panel of equal parts parents, students, educators and the public, with a distinct focus on encouraging innovation.
- Replace monthly meetings with a single organizational meeting and an annual “innovation conference.”
- Base communications and outreach professionals in each region who report to the superintendent. Centralize web, multimedia and ‘back end’ communications services (e.g. graphic design, videography) at SEA level for economies of scale.

Discussion

Creating better community engagement is both about finding ways for the public to be engaged in the process and for improving communications with them. As outlined above, a need exists to better incorporate student and parent voice into the process in a systematic way. This proposal does that by restructuring current governance board structures to support this engagement and also to support innovation in curriculum and practice. Additionally, regionalization of communications and outreach resources will have significant benefits in terms of economies of scale, equity outreach capacity of individual schools and ability for regions to call on shared communications services.

Governance Councils

Under the GSSD model, school governance should be reimaged to encourage increased student and parent participation at all levels, facilitate good policy governance and more space for innovation and experimentation. This should occur at every possible level from within individual schools to entire state. The above recommendations are imagined for each level. At the school level their primary roles would advisory and as a booster for the school to the local community, at the regional level and above they would have increased governance responsibilities.

The focus of these governance councils shall be:

- Encouraging community engagement and providing a forum for community feedback

- Fostering and supporting innovation
- Policy governance (in limited circumstances)

These governance bodies shall have a limited role (outside of normal advocacy and individual speech) in school finance decision-making or the structure of the entire system, which shall be the purview of the Vermont General Assembly.

School Level

Designing Our Future imagines that each school will have a Parent School Committee, which “would advise school principals on various aspects relative to operating a school, but the principal would have final authority and responsibility for school decisions.” Ideal roles for this committee would include providing feedback on school policies, curriculums and advocating for the school to the community. The members of the parent school committee could be elected from the parent body through a digital election.

This proposal further recommends two additional bodies: for age appropriate grade bands, a student governance council, which would be responsible for articulating student voice and collaborating with teachers and administrators. The structure could vary according to the individual needs of the school and the region, but these councils could be integrated with, an extension of or supplant traditional “student government.” While their roles and responsibilities would differ based on grade level, it is not inconceivable that middle level (and even the higher grades of K-6 elementary schools) could participate in some meaningful way.

The third structure would be an educator innovation committee, made up of peer-selected teachers and responsible for guiding classroom innovation. Incumbents would ideally be veteran teachers and administrators, experienced in the open education model, who could advise and mentor colleagues in the development of new practices and help them share successful practices across the region and the state. Taken together, this committee would report to the principal and advise her leadership team.

In addition to their outreach and advisory roles, all three of these groups together would have a role as booster organizations for the school, in the same way that PTA / PTOs operate today.

Involving all three groups in collaboration on community-school events would help make community engagement at the school level focused on student and parent needs and celebrating student success.

Regional / District Level

Designing Our Future proposes that a single, statewide school district would be divided into four regions:

“The system would be administered by a series of four Regional School Boards (Northern Region, Chittenden Region, Central Region, and Southern Region).”

The plan states further that the local school boards would be elected, have policy governance authority, monitor school performance and would hire the regional superintendent. This

proposal goes further and recommends that we reimagine the structure of a school board to increase parent engagement, student voice and innovation. In this proposal, the policy entity would be renamed a “regional education council” to make a clean break from the past, and would be paired with a body of teachers, administrators and students responsible for region-wide innovation. The rationale for “decommissioning” the term board is simple: under *Designing Our Future*’s model, financial and structural decisions are now the sole responsibility of the legislature and the governor through the legislative process, whereas boards currently have a role in these areas. Changing the name signifies the changed role and set of responsibilities entrusted to the regional councils.

Regional Education Councils

Each regional education district would have a Regional Education Council. The council would hire the regional superintendent (though the process for removing a superintendent could and probably should include the Secretary of Education), conduct policy governance, hear public comment on local and regional education issues, and monitor school quality.

The council would be made up of members of the public elected at large from the region, parents and student members. The exact ratios could vary: 30% students, 30% parents or recent parents, and 40% at large members seems nice and clean – if more “general public” input is desired, the ratio could be adjusted to 25%-25%-50% or similar.

Qualifications for parent members would be that the individual is a current or recent (within 2 or 3 years) parent of a PreK-12 student. Parent members could be nominated by principals from members of the school-level parent committees and selected by the Superintendent or, via a digital election of parents via the region’s school portal.

Qualifications for student members would be students in high school. Students could serve either one or two years on the board, preceded by one year of non-voting membership. If students serve two years terms as full voting members their appointments should be staggered to give each grade level and opportunity to serve and to allow a balance of new and experienced student members. Students should be nominated by principals from grade 10 (or 11, if serving a one voting year) and chosen by the superintendent. Students who have previously served on school level student councils would be preferred.

Regional Innovation Working Groups

A regional education working group would be a less formal body devoted to spearheading innovation, advising the regional leadership team and engaging schools and the public around excellence and curriculum development. The superintendent would select members from teacher leaders, administrators and students across the region or district. It may be desired to have several members of Regional Education Council serve in the working group, depending on need or scope of work.

SEA Level

Designing Our Future proposes abolishing the State Board of Education. This proposal recommends radically changing its membership and shifting its focus to support statewide innovation and open education collaboration.

State Education Innovation Council

The SBE should be renamed the State Education Innovation Council or the State Education Council. Its 20-30 person membership should comprise 25% parents nominated by regional superintendents, 25% students nominated by principals, 25% teachers selected by the Secretary of Education, and 25% at large members selected by the Governor.

The SEIC should have two standing committees, an Education Quality committee, responsible for reviewing and proposing changes to the EQS and curriculum standards to the Secretary, and an innovation committee, focused on fostering development of best and promising practices for statewide use. Most of the council's work would be done in the committees. Their process and structure could be flexible, focusing on a narrowly defined set of charges given by the legislature or the Secretary. On the innovation committee for example, a single councilor or a small group (perhaps one adult and one student) might be delegated responsibility for a particular practice, convening a conversation with local and regional innovation committees to flesh out a proposal.

Council terms would last one year and begin in January. The full council would meet seldom, perhaps for an organizational meeting in February. Committee work would take place throughout the spring and summer and culminate in a Statewide Education Conference in October or early November. At this conference the committees would report out their work, adopt any resolutions or proposals, and submit any reports to the legislature or the Secretary. This conference could be far more than a board meeting – rather an opportunity for all of #vted to come together to share resources and collaborate. One imagines regional innovation entities presenting their work or participating in panel discussions adjacent to the SEIC's main forums. The conference would be a capstone to the entire systems year of innovation, timed to release work well in advance of the next legislative session.

Logistical Considerations

With the focus of many of these bodies shifting from politics and policy to collaboration and innovation, a question can be asked to what extent they need to be formalized in statute or given a standard set of responsibilities. The local Parent School Committees and student councils could, with their more advisory role, be less formal and not subject to formal meeting rules and the open meeting law. Similarly, the teacher innovation working groups might function more as staff organizations to the regional central office than as public bodies. Certainly, the Regional Education Councils, with their policy and public engagement role must be public bodies with warned open meetings, and the full plenary sessions of the Statewide Education Innovation Council should as well, though ideally, they will more closely resemble conferences than public meetings.

For some boards, regional variations according to need could also be contemplated, with individual education regions varying structure, time and frequency of meeting, membership and method of appointment according to the needs of the region, of the superintendent or the will of the public.

Building Strong Regional Communications and Outreach Systems

Principals and Superintendents have always been the “chief engagement officer” for a school or district, and nothing in the GSSD model will change that. However, Vermont schools have recently begun to create positions for full time communications professionals. And the needs are great: from crisis communications to building a strong community through brand communications. With this in mind, the GSSD model has significant benefits in that it would both greatly expand communications capacity, while achieving significant savings through economies of scale. Additionally, as noted above in the unmet needs section, a regional system of communications would improve equity among schools in availability of communications tools and strategies.

Regional Communications Teams

Each education region or district would have one (or more) FTE position for a communications professional who reports directly to the superintendent. This person would be responsible for public and media relations, communications strategy, building communications policies, plans and best practices, and serving as an ombudsman for the region. The communications director would also be responsible for training principals and their staff and providing guidance and best practices around social media, parent-school communication and public relations.

Each regional communications team would be fully responsible for direct communication with the public but could call on the support and resources of shared services centralized at the SEA level. Examples of what could be shared among regions includes, but is not limited to, multimedia services like graphic design, photography and videography, in house services or master contracts for web design, branding or communications strategy, and additional resources in cases of emergencies, special events or other high-demand times. In this way the communications team at the SEA level, in addition to serving the Agency of Education’s communications needs, would provide services to regions through a client relationship similar to a PR agency.

Regionalism in the Communications Context

Regionalization of communications services will not only provide additional support for education leaders in the region and save a significant amount for resources, it would also give each region an opportunity to define their brand and build a public identity that new members of the region can get behind. One can imagine the Champlain Valley schools, for example, building a brand identity and community spirit that is distinct from the North Country Regional Schools or Central Vermont School System. This building of public identity, far from

being just an exercise in branding, is a way to build community around every aspect of education that excites people, from academic excellence to sports.

The decision as to what level of responsibility and flexibility to assign to regions for things like contracted parent-school communications platforms, web portals and the like, versus what should be standardized statewide is a decision best left to the Secretary of Education in consultation with regional superintendents, rather than the policy process more generally. Exactly where the balance is located between economies of scale and shared services and the needs of individual regions to build a strong, distinct community around their local schools will likely prove to be a complicated, possibly ever-shifting question.

DRAFT